

CHAUCER TO DYLAN THOMAS

100  
poems

A.J.M. SMITH

*100*  
*POEMS*



SELECTED AND EDITED  
WITH AN INTRODUCTION  
AND GLOSSARY BY

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Michigan State University

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*100*

*POEMS*

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## *To the Reader*

This is a book of samples. It is a short and representative selection of the best poems written in English from the end of the Middle Ages to the present. It would be absurd of course to claim that this is *THE* hundred best poems in the language or indeed to think that such a collection could possibly be made. These are all good poems, however, and most of them (in spite of the wide differences in style, mood, tone, attitude, and genre) are by any standard great poems.

This is a book of poems, and it is better to talk at first about poems rather than about poetry, though I should think it would hardly be possible to read right through these hundred poems without acquiring some knowledge of poetry in general and, if good will is there, a heightened feeling for it.

Let me set down a few axioms. Some readers may like to consider them now; others may prefer to wait until they have read a good many of the poems. The readers this book is mainly intended for are students in their first year of college, most of whom are not specialists in 'English' and whose acquaintance with great poems of earlier times has been limited or casual. For such it may be better to pick up knowledge and acquire a skill in reading by going directly to the poems. Then when interest has been stimulated and curiosity aroused the student may like to check his impressions with some of the assertions and judgments set down here at the beginning.

First, it should be recognized that no matter what the ultimate purpose of a poem may be that purpose can only be achieved insofar as it gives pleasure. "If the prospect of delight be wanting," as John Dryden said, the poem will never be read and its purpose not even suspected. In a collection of *good* poems, however, there is the prospect of many kinds of pleasure—from emotional involvement to the intellectual excitement that may come from seeing a difficult or intricate problem in emotional dynamics neatly solved. Keats' "Ode to a Night-

ingale" gives us the one sort of pleasure, Marvell's "To his Coy Mistress" the other; and there are almost as many sorts of pleasure in between as there are poems.

Now for some axioms, dogmatic articles, which have helped the compiler select the particular great poems that make up this book.

Making poems is a human and personal activity.

Poetry is both expression and communication.

Poetry is a form of speech, and while its raw material is experience, the medium is language. It is an ordering of words. Ezra Pound has defined poetry as *news that stays news*.

A poet, as the word is derived from the Greek and as Chaucer named him, is a maker. A poem is something made, and like a chair or a table, it is shaped by conscious craftsmanship. It doesn't just come as an unexpected and undeserved free gift of the Muses.

Now we may consider the poem as expression and concentrate on the maker—his experience, his intention, the quality of his sensibility, and his technical proficiency. Or we may consider the poem as a thing in itself, an artifact having an independent and objective existence—not an 'imitation of nature' at all but a new and unique thing that must justify its own being as a new and beautiful impingement upon our perceptions. This is the view Archibald MacLeish is taking when he tells us that "A poem should not mean/But be" and that William Carlos Williams illustrates when he makes a complete poem out of the single statement:

so much depends  
upon  
a red wheel  
barrow  
glazed with rain  
water  
beside the white  
chickens

or presents a ball game as a poem—a poem that everyone feels and understands:

The crowd at the ball game  
is moved uniformly  
by a spirit of uselessness  
which delights them—



all the exciting detail  
of the chase  
  
and the escape, the error  
the flash of genius—  
  
all to no end save beauty  
the eternal.

This is the concept of the poem as a self-justifying thing-in-itself, a living and delightful object. The printed or written poem, it must be said, is only the script. The poem itself is the vibrations of the sounds on the air and in the eardrum as it is read aloud and heard, or the indentations of the mind as it is absorbed—ultimately, that is, a psychological stimulus, a mental and emotional ballet.

Or again, we may consider the poem as communication.

Like other works of art, as distinguished from contributions to knowledge, editorials, timetables, digests of science, and expository prose generally, a poem is indivisibly and at the same time both what is communicated and the instrument of communication. It is at once the telegraph wire, the electric current, and the message transmitted. But it is not the man who sends it, and not, of course, the man (if any) who receives it.

It is to this problematical and ideal recipient, the proverbial "dear reader," you yourself whoever you are, that we must turn for a moment.

There is indeed an ideal reader or listener as well as an ideal poet and an ideal poem; and it is useful to think about them all and to consider the qualities and virtues of each. The reader has responsibilities just as the poet has. Let us think for a moment what they are.

The first rule of what might be called "good readership"—at least with respect to poetry—is to approach the poem with an open (but not an empty) mind. A poem has been defined, accurately enough, if a little pedantically, as a highly organized, complex, and unified re-creation of an experience; and it aims to communicate to the receptive reader a new experience, analogous to the one out of which the poet made his poem. Furthermore, a poem makes use of the widest variety of the rich and subtle resources of language, while at the same time it utilizes also a number of special techniques having to do with rhythm, harmony, and figurative language. It is not reasonable to ex-

pect that what depends on subtlety, complexity, nuance and suggestion should be immediately, easily, and completely available to every casual uninstructed cursory inspection. The reader, indeed, should be prepared to give to the assimilation of a mature poem something of the same diligent and loving care that a student of music gives to a fugue of Bach or a sonata of Beethoven.

One of the first difficulties that the uninstructed or the misinstructed reader finds before him lies in the distinctiveness of much poetic language. Poetic language is a form of picture-writing; it is essentially figurative, making frequent use of metaphor and simile, image and symbol to *suggest* what cannot be stated and to convey the emotional correlative of a thought rather than the naked thought itself. Poetic language differs from the language of science or fact in that it implies or suggests more or less than it states, and sometimes indeed achieves an effect of irony or significant ambiguity by a suggestion or a tone that is in sharp contrast to the literal assertion. It uses sound effects and picturesque images, fantastic comparisons and metaphysical conceits, striving "to apprehend," as Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* put it, "More than cool reason ever comprehends."

Many people (even many who habitually use slang, which when original and new is one of the purest forms of poetic language) often fail to interpret figurative language imaginatively or, what is commoner, as the experiment described in I. A. Richards' *Practical Criticism* demonstrates, translate it too literally. There is the story (probably apocryphal) of the student in Freshman English who interpreted Keats' line "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter" as "It's nice to listen to music, but it's nicer not to." That is an extreme case, but many ordinary readers find themselves in the same sort of difficulty when they read in Shelley that

Life like a dome of many-coloured glass  
Stains the white radiance of eternity

or in T. S. Eliot that

the evening is spread out against the sky  
Like a patient etherised upon a table.

If there is a failure of communication here I am not suggesting that any moral obloquy attaches to the common reader or any conviction of sin is to be brought home to him. Far from it. I am only saying

that the prejudice against the complexity and the imaginative or impressionistic richness of much mature poetry is very widespread (and quite understandable) but that if the causes of that prejudice are understood it can be cleared up—at least for readers who are willing to learn to read with their senses alert and their imagination awake. This is not an easy task, but it is an important one.

The widespread ignorance of the language of poetry and of art in general has some serious consequences. What they are in their most general terms was stated by the English critic F. R. Leavis. The arts, he began by assuming, are something more than a luxury product—they are the “storehouse of recorded values” and, in consequence, “there is a necessary relationship between the quality of the individual’s response to art and his general fitness for humane existence.” The most disastrous result from the point of view of the incompetent reader is a general impoverishment of life, an inability to partake of the rich banquet that the poets and artists, *those whose ideas are always at the tip of their senses*, spread before him.

The sensuous and imaginative richness of language, a richness that enhances and is enhanced by real depth of thought, gives poetry its essential quality. Poetry is language purified of the superficial, and whether we find it in Chaucer, Donne, Pope, or Dylan Thomas we can detect its hard, sharp, concentrated intensity—an intensity of thought and feeling that cannot be separated. “Literature” (poetry, that is), said Ezra Pound, “is language *charged* with meaning”—charged as a battery is charged with electricity, bristling with energy, and loaded with significance. And this is true of even the gentlest poem.

Here in our hundred poems we have all moods and tones, tender and bitter, savage and gentle, serene and passionate, angry and resigned, but what they all have in common is a devotion to the truth of the poet’s feeling and a technical mastery adequate to the task of communicating that truth accurately and powerfully.

But a great poem demands a great reader. It is to help the student become such a reader that these poems are offered for his consideration and, the editor hopes, for his delight.

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